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KEEPING SECRETS

Chief of the US's top-secret listening post says leaks have harmed security

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Lt. Gen. William Odom may be in charge of more secrets than anyone else in the world - and he worries that too many of them have been revealed.

General Odom is director of the National Security Agency (NSA), the United States's electronic intelligence agency. He claims that leaks have done more damage to NSA operations over the past three or four years than at any other time in recent memory.

"I don't want to blame anybody. I'm just stuck with the consequences of it," he said yesterday in a rare meeting with reporters over breakfast.

The three-star Army general declined to list specific revealed secrets, saying only that an intelligence source in Damascus had dried up after the appearance of printed reports concerning US interception of communications in Syria. NSA actions targeted at Libya had also been damaged, he said.

Other US officials have complained that revelations about Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's support of terrorism, which were used to support last year's US air strikes against Libya, inadvertently revealed intelligence sources and methods. Reports on the past use of US submarines to tap Soviet communications cables have also been very damaging, according to officials.

General Odom indicated that he is in favor of investigating damaging leaks and prosecuting those responsible. "The first people under the gun ought to be leakers in the administration," he said.

But he clearly believes that media organizations and authors who print leaked information should be charged as well. He said that he personally had submitted cases to the Department of Justice for possible prosecution. The Justice Department "has taken them under consideration," Odom said, but he admitted that none of these cases had yet been acted upon.

Communications intelligence has special protection under US law, the NSA chief claims. Herbert Yardley, the father of US government electronic eavesdropping, published material in the 1920s that Congress considered damaging to the US. In response, a law was eventually passed that concerns leaks only of communications, not human-gathered intelligence, according to Odom. He admitted this statute has seldom been invoked.

One specific book Odom mentioned as damaging was "The Puzzle Palace," a 1982 work on the NSA by investigative reporter James Bamford. He says the book is in the libraries of many foreign intelligence agencies.

On other subjects, Odom said:

- He had no unambiguous evidence that Marine guards had allowed Soviet spies into the inner sanctum of the US embassy in Moscow - its communications chambers. But he said the dictates of counter-intelligence mean US intelligence must behave as if this worst-case scenario were true.

"Even if they only had a few minutes to an hour's access, in an adjoining area, it would have been quite damaging," he said.

- Internal security at the NSA has improved since the disclosure in 1985 that Ronald Pelton, a former mid-level NSA employee, had sold secrets to the Soviet Union. "I don't feel paralyzed in my daily work because of fear that I'm surrounded by moles," he said.

But he added that no one could give full assurance that the NSA, or any other US intelligence agency, would never again be compromised.

- Any treaty limiting intermediate-range nuclear weapons would be harder to verify than earlier arms pacts. He said that, paradoxically, the more Congress and the White House debate the verification issue, the harder his job is, as limits of capability are inadvertently revealed.

"The more enlightened the verification debate, the weaker my capability becomes," he said.